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New York City Hall
City Hall Park, bounded by Broadway,
Park Row, and Chambers Street
Manhattan
New York City
New York County
New York

HABS No. NY-234

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

CITY HALL PROJECT

Name: New York City Hall

Location: City Hall Park, bounded by Broadway, Park Row, and Chambers Street, Manhattan, New York City, New York County, New York.

Present owner, occupant, use: Owned by the City of New York. Still in use as New York City Hall.

Significance: The New York City Hall has served since 1812 as the center of municipal government. Designed by John McComb, Jr. and Joseph Mangin in the Federal style with French Renaissance overtones, it has been praised as the most beautiful city hall in the United States. The symmetrical plan, crowning cupola, and delicate decorative detail are among the outstanding features of the building. Not only is the building an exceptional design, but it also houses a notable collection of American painting and sculpture.

I. Historical Information

A. Physical History

1. Date of erection: 1803-11. The Common Council of New York advertised a competition for a new city hall on February 20, 1802. The cornerstone was laid by Mayor Edward Livingstone on May 26, 1803. Formal dedication took place on July 4, 1811, but the building was not occupied until 1812.

2. Architects: Joseph François Mangin and John McComb, Jr. Presentation drawings and working drawings are in the collections of the New-York Historical Society. Joseph Mangin (dates unknown) is believed to have been a French émigré who came to America in the wake of the French Revolution. He was appointed City Surveyor in 1795 and prepared an official City map, published in 1803, with Casimir Goerck. Besides City Hall, his other major New York City work is Old St. Patrick's Cathedral on Mott Street. John McComb, Jr. (1763-1853) was the leading architect in New York City after the American Revolution. Among his works are Hamilton Grange on Convent Avenue, Castle Clinton in Battery Park, the James Watson house on State Street, and the original Queen's College building at Rutgers University. New York City Hall is the only design on which the two architects collaborated.

3. Builder, contractor, suppliers: John McComb was appointed architect in charge of construction. John LeMaire was the supervising stonecarver. Marble was supplied by the quarry of Johnson and Stevens in Stockbridge, Massachusetts; the brownstone was from Newark, New Jersey.

4. Original plans and construction: The exterior and major interior spaces remain unaltered. Original drawings and McComb's extensive record books may be found in the collections of the New-York Historical Society.

5. Alterations and additions: A fire in 1858 destroyed the tower and attic floor. Plans for rebuilding were drawn by Leopold Eidlitz. The present City Council Chamber on the second floor, dating from 1897, is by John H. Duncan. Major restoration work on the interior including the Governor's Room, the rotunda, and the Board of Estimate Chamber was carried out by Grosvenor Atterbury between 1908 and 1915. Following a fire in 1917, the tower was again rebuilt, closely following McComb's original drawings. Because of extensive deterioration of the original exterior stonework, the marble and brownstone were completely replaced by white Alabama limestone and red Minnesota granite under the direction of Shreve, Lamb & Harmon Associates in 1954-56.

B. Historical Context

The present building is New York's third city hall (the other two have long since disappeared), and was built in response to the needs of a rapidly expanding city. At the time of construction, City Hall Park, originally the Commons, defined the northernmost settlement of the city. New York City Hall has served as the seat of city government since 1812, housing the offices of the mayor and the city's legislative bodies. It has been the site of numerous important ceremonies. The fire of 1858 resulted from a fireworks display celebrating the laying of the Atlantic cable. The bodies of Abraham Lincoln and Ulysses S. Grant lay in state in the rotunda before their burial.

II. Architectural Information

A. Description of Exterior: New York City Hall, which measures approximately 100 by 225 feet, is two stories high above a low basement with a centrally-placed attic and tower with cupola topped by a copper figure of Justice. The structure is rectangularly massed with projecting end pavilions and has nineteen bays across the front. The entrance is accented by a one-story portico approached by a broad flight of steps. The masonry bearing walls are faced with Indiana limestone above a granite basement, and the whole is surmounted by a shallow copper-covered hipped roof.

B. Description of the Interior: The interior layout is an axial symmetrical plan with offices on the first floor and major meeting rooms on the second floor. The entrance portico leads into the marble-faced lobby and two-story rotunda with double-curved stairway and coffered dome. Major rooms on the second floor are the Committee of the Whole Room in the west wing with Corinthian columns supporting an ornamental dome; the Board of Estimate Chamber to the north of the committee room with extensive decorative plasterwork, semi-domes at the ends, and raised dais; the City Council Committee Room in the east wing; the City Council Chamber to the east of the rotunda with mahogany paneling and ceiling mural; and the Governor's Room which extends across the front of the central section. This room features marble mantelpieces and handsome decorative plasterwork and contains an extensive collection of American art.

C. Site: City Hall is situated in City Hall Park facing south. Immediately to the north is the Tweed Courthouse. In front of the building is a parking lot for the cars of city officials. The remainder of the park is landscaped and contains a fountain at its south end.

III. Sources of Information

A. Architectural Drawings: Original competition drawings and working drawings from 1802 on are in the collections of the New-York Historical Society.

B. Early Views: Numerous early views may be found in the collections of the Museum of the City of New York, the New York City Art Commission, the New York City Municipal Archives, the New-York Historical Society, and the New York Public Library. Many have been reproduced, most notably in I.N. Phelps Stokes' Iconography of Manhattan Island.

C. Bibliography

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2. Secondary sources

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D. A detailed account and study of New York City Hall remains to be written. The existing research materials are vast but have yet to be thoroughly explored.

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